

EXHIBIT

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U.S. POLITICS

How Much of a Threat is Tren de Aragua in the U.S.?



BY CHARLES LARRATT-SMITH AND JOHN POLGA-HECIMOVICH
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The Venezuelan prison gang was a frequent theme in Donald Trump's campaign rhetoric on immigration. But its reach in the U.S. is exaggerated.



A member of the Tren de Aragua gang in the custody of Peruvian police in Lima in October 2023.

Cris Bouroncle/AFP via Getty Images



Reading Time: 8 minutes

On October 11, Donald Trump held a campaign event in Aurora, Colorado, where the then-Republican party candidate and now president-elect appeared on stage flanked by large placards bearing mugshots of Venezuelan immigrants who had been arrested following their arrival to the United States. These campaign props were adorned with the words “Occupied America: TDA Gang Members in Aurora,” while the backdrop of the stage was draped in banners bearing the slogan “Deport Illegals Now.” It seemed unusual for the Trump campaign to spend valuable time and energy to organize a rally in a state widely expected to vote Democratic, during the homestretch of what appeared at the time to be a close electoral contest. But the purpose of this campaign event was above all else symbolic.

In late August, video footage had emerged of a group of armed Venezuelan migrants trying to forcibly enter an apartment in a housing

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In late August, video footage had emerged of a group of armed Venezuelan migrants trying to forcibly enter an apartment in a housing complex in this nondescript suburb of Denver, a city that has at times struggled to accommodate a large wave of migrants from Latin America over the past several years. After the building's out-of-state landlord claimed the building had been taken over by a Venezuelan prison gang, Tren de Aragua (TdA), the mayor of Aurora repeated the claim, before reversing himself as the incident was seized upon by conservative politicians, media pundits, and online influencers to make exaggerated claims that the city had been "taken over" by criminals from Venezuela.

As the election approached, this once largely unknown criminal organization was thrust into the spotlight as an emergent threat to U.S. national security, its "vicious" activities attracting the attention of Republican legislators and executive branch agencies. In the aftermath of a resounding Trump victory at the polls, buoyed in part by the electorate's disapproval with the Biden administration's handling of immigration and border enforcement, an important yet largely unanswered question remains: Does TdA actually pose a legitimate threat to U.S. national security?

Surprisingly little is known about Tren de Aragua, a fact that has given it great power and allowed it to assume the shape of a chimera in the eyes of both law enforcement and other criminal actors. Several governments in the Americas have sounded the alarm about the group, while criminals operating in the Venezuelan diaspora have claimed links to TdA to bolster their reputations and criminal legitimacy. The gang has permanent cells in Peru and in Chile, where it carried out a high-profile assassination in 2023. At the same time, evidence suggests that the TdA has had trouble expanding in places with competitive criminal markets and where state coercive capacity is strong.

Given all of this, the fear and campaign-season rhetoric in the U.S. is overblown. Despite the real threat TdA poses to many Venezuelan migrants, it's unlikely the group has much power or reach in the U.S., where other organized criminal organizations pose much more of a threat to citizens and TdA itself.



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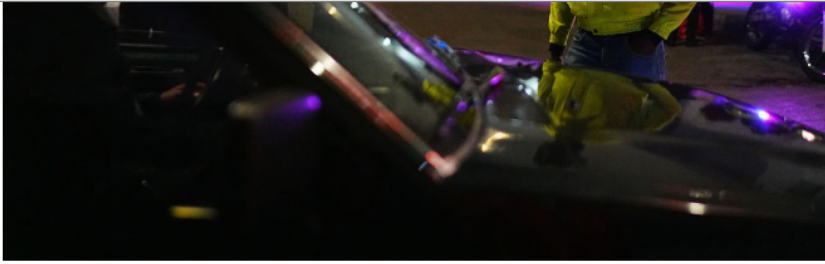
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A police officer at a checkpoint in Bogotá, where Tren de Aragua operates in some neighborhoods, in October. Photo by Juancho Torres/Anadolu via Getty Images.

What we know about Tren de Aragua

The origins of TdA are well documented. The group first emerged in 2005, as a trade union formed to build a railroad during the government of Hugo Chávez. The consortium of workers quickly began embezzling funds, before moving into extorting contractors. By the time the project was abandoned in 2011, this nucleus of ersatz railway workers had metamorphosed into a criminal organization known as el Tren de Aragua. The group quickly developed a formidable presence in the state's notorious Tocarón prison. It was there that its current leader, Héctor Rusthenford Guerrero Flores (alias 'Niño Guerrero'), joined in 2013, quickly becoming the '*pran*'—an incarcerated gang leader who controls prisons from the inside while simultaneously directing criminal organizations outside of them. Under his tutelage, TdA expanded to several neighboring states and became Venezuela's largest criminal organization of its kind, engaging principally in extortion, street-level drug dealing, and human trafficking.

The rise of TdA coincided with the onset of the Venezuelan economic crisis. The implosion of the economy combined with hyperinflation led to the virtual collapse of the country's social safety net, prompting millions of young Venezuelans to migrate. Sensing an opportunity in the crisis, TdA expanded its operations to the porous border region and charged outgoing migrants fees to exit through irregular border crossings, or '*trochas*', while other members reportedly embedded themselves in migrant flows heading to other South American countries to prey on their compatriots. With the worsening of the migrant crisis in 2018, reports began to surface from law enforcement in Colombia, Peru, and Chile that TdA had established chapters and was engaged in widespread criminal activities in those countries.

Still, TdA had limited success setting up operations in Colombia, despite the fact that the two countries share a 1,379 mile-long border. Gang members who tried to make incursions into border enclaves such as Arauca and Cúcuta were met with violent resistance from Colombian insurgent groups such as the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) and Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) dissident factions, demonstrating the extreme difficulties facing new entrants into Colombia's established criminal market. Other apparent TdA chapters were more successful in establishing a presence elsewhere in less competitive environs, particularly in Bogotá, where they principally devoted themselves to micro-level extortion and drug dealing in poorer

Colombia's established criminal market. Other apparent TdA chapters were more successful in establishing a presence elsewhere in less competitive environs, particularly in Bogotá, where they principally devoted themselves to micro-level extortion and drug dealing in poorer neighborhoods. Tellingly, even in these spaces TdA operatives subcontract smaller local gangs and authorize them to use their name to generate fear and compliance with their victims.

TdA found it easier to expand and establish roots in places with large contingents of Venezuelan migrants and fewer local criminal rivals. This is especially true of Chile and Peru, where the group appears to have established permanent cells, from Santiago and Lima to the Peru-Chile and Chile-Bolivia border areas. While the gang makes money from human trafficking, narcotrafficking, and extortion, it has also wielded violence there, particularly against fellow Venezuelan migrants. In a case that made international headlines, TdA allegedly planned and carried out the kidnapping and heinous murder of Ronald Ojeda, a former first lieutenant in Venezuela's armed forces and an opponent of the Venezuelan regime, in March 2023 in Chile. The lack of criminal competitors in these places was decisive in the group's expansion, in contrast to Ecuador or Brazil, where there is little evidence of permanent cells.

The gang's relationship with Venezuelan security forces and government officials is also shrouded in mystery, but hints at organizational weaknesses. TdA's initial growth was driven by the state's unofficial devolution of power to the *pranes* under Prison Minister Iris Varela and the impunity it enjoyed within and outside of Tócorón. Under this agreement, it was allowed to operate out of the prison for years with the government's knowledge and tacit consent. However, in September 2023, perhaps in response to a breakdown in the *pax mafiosa*, the government raided the prison, effectively dismantling the group's headquarters. Nonetheless, TdA's leader, Guerrero, and others appear to have received advanced warning and escaped via tunnel prior to the raid. Telling, this episode illustrates not only TdA's relationship to the Venezuelan state, but how much weaker TdA is compared to Mexico's Sinaloa Cartel and the Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG), Colombia's ELN, EMC, and EGC, Ecuador's Los Choneros, or Brazil's Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC), none of which could plausibly be dismantled through a single coordinated government raid.

Transnational threat or electoral bogeyman?

Over the past two decades, criminality in Venezuela skyrocketed largely as a result of the failed security policies of *chavismo*, making it one of the most dangerous countries on the planet. The implosion of the Venezuelan economy coupled with the authoritarian consolidation of Nicolás Maduro's regime led to an unprecedented exodus of largely working class and poorer Venezuelans throughout the Americas. Unsurprisingly, much of the Venezuelan criminal class has similarly fled these worsening conditions during this period with many attempting to re-establish their

Maduro's regime led to an unprecedented exodus of largely working class and poorer Venezuelans throughout the Americas. Unsurprisingly, much of the Venezuelan criminal class has similarly fled these worsening conditions during this period with many attempting to re-establish their illicit careers abroad, generating palpable xenophobia and fervent anti-immigrant sentiment in the process.

Although TdA never achieved a nationwide presence in its home country, the gang has somehow gained notoriety as the most fearsome transnational criminal organization across the Americas from Chile to the United States in the span of a few years. Rather than the TdA expanding its tentacles throughout South and North America from its former base in Tocarón and threatening to destabilize the entire region, it is far more probable that any and all criminal acts committed abroad by a miniscule percentage of the Venezuelan diaspora are now attributed to TdA due to a paucity of real information on the criminal group's structure and organizational culture. Reported factions of the group in Chile and Peru, for example, operate under names such as the Gallegos, the Hijos de Dios, and Dinastía Alayón, making it difficult for law enforcement to determine their exact relationship to the larger group.

Recent investigative reports from InSight Crime highlight several inconvenient truths about this Venezuelan gang that challenge the existing narrative in the United States. Among other things, the tattoos or dress codes ascribed to TdA members in the U.S. has little backing in other places where the gang has been known to operate. The origin of that information is also uncertain, given that U.S. and Venezuelan authorities do not share intelligence. Of course, one consequence of the lack of clear identifiers is the ease with which non-affiliated Venezuelan criminals in the diaspora may claim membership in order to further burnish their credentials in the pursuit of illegal activities.

Of equal importance, nearly no claims made by U.S. law enforcement about crimes committed by purported members of TdA have been substantiated by hard evidence that directly connects the accused with the organization in Venezuela. In fact, none of the national, state, and local law enforcement agencies contacted in the U.S. by InSight Crime in April 2024 reported any significant presence of TdA in their jurisdictions.

Despite assertions from some quarters that TdA is conspiring to seize control of criminal rackets in major U.S. cities, the actual organizational potential of Venezuelan criminals to do so is overblown, particularly in the United States. In Venezuela, the gang was only strong until the government decided to combat it, and law enforcement operations have clamped down on supposed structures in other South American countries. For these reasons, it would be difficult for the TdA to establish itself in the U.S. while coordinating with what remains of the organization's fugitive hierarchy in Venezuela. Among other things, the gang lacks control over the migrant smuggling and human trafficking routes in the U.S. that were so vital to its expansion to prisons and urban areas in South America. Instead, small factions of apparent TdA members

organization's fugitive hierarchy in Venezuela. Among other things, the gang lacks control over the migrant smuggling and human trafficking routes in the U.S. that were so vital to its expansion to prisons and urban areas in South America. Instead, small factions of apparent TdA members have offered their services to more powerful Mexican cartels that dominate the border.

The alarmism over Tren de Aragua in the U.S., in short, does not correspond to the facts on the ground as we know them. The recent assertion in Senator Rubio and Representative Salazar's petition to President Biden that TdA is "an invading criminal army from a prison in Venezuela that has spread their brutality and chaos to U.S. cities and small towns" is emblematic of the exaggeration. Not to be outdone by fellow Republicans from Florida, Texas Governor Greg Abbott officially designated TdA as a "foreign terrorist organization" in mid-September, even though the gang lacks any meaningful political criteria to meet this definition. In the final days of the recent election, the governor further demanded that Vice President and Democratic candidate Kamala Harris follow suit and classify TdA along those same lines.

Some Venezuelan criminals have succeeded in entering the United States in recent years, including perhaps a few full-fledged TdA members with direct links to the Venezuelan hierarchy. But it is highly unlikely that they will be able to mobilize in any meaningful way in the United States. Based on the recent successes of law enforcement in Chile, Peru, and Colombia in capturing and dismantling substantial TdA structures, TdA and other aspiring Venezuelan criminals will likely fare no better in the U.S. when confronted by police with considerably greater resources at their disposal than their Andean counterparts.

The fallout from the campaign

While perhaps an effective electoral ploy, it's dangerous to exaggerate TdA's threat for several reasons. Paying disproportionate attention to the group takes valuable time and resources away from prosecuting more powerful transnational organized criminal groups, such as the CJNG or the Sinaloa Cartel, that are largely responsible for fueling the opioid crisis in the United States and destabilizing other countries in the region.

And using TdA to support the narrative that immigrants are criminals is damaging to the Venezuelan diaspora in the United States. If the Department of Homeland Security's recent estimation that there are 600 active TdA members in the United States is in fact true, these individuals would still constitute 0.09% of the estimated 700,000 Venezuelans who have been paroled into the United States since the beginning of the humanitarian crisis. But Trump invoked Venezuelans more than any other nationality in his anti-immigrant campaign rhetoric, and his party members followed suit, creating additional risks for those living in stigmatized communities such as Aurora. While the scope, scale, and feasibility of the impending deportation campaign that Trump has promised remains unknown, it is highly probable that Venezuelan migrants will be severely affected by these draconian measures, whether

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